



## Air fleet armed to fight this bushfire season



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ALEXANDRA MIDDLETON

WHEN a bushfire breaks out in Tasmania, Kym Fullerton is usually the first one at – or above – the scene. Within 15 minutes of a fire being reported, the Tasmanian Fire Service pilot will already be in the air and en route to the blaze in the state's only Special Intelligence Gathering helicopter.

The chopper, which is fully equipped with cameras to monitor incidents and relay crucial information, is one of 12 specialised aircraft that will help fight fires from above this bushfire season. With more than 12 years' experience as a pilot – the last five with the state's firefighting aviation fleet – Mr Fullerton said the AS350 helicopter was "perfect for the job".

"It's very light, it's fast, so we can get out overhead pretty quickly," Mr Fullerton said. "Once we're airborne, depending on where the wind is, we're doing 200km/h to get out to the fire. "The whole point is to get to fire quickly, particularly with all the information we can get out there. We send those pictures back to the people on the ground to make re-

ally informed decisions about what sort of assets they need over the fire very, very fast." Supported by the federal government and co-ordinated by the National Aerial Fire-fighting Centre, the specialised airfleet is made up of eight helicopters and four fixed-wing planes which have the ability to drop water bombs over fires and can be dispatched across the state.

Tasmania Fire Service also has about 20 locally-owned aircraft at their disposal. Mr Fullerton said the air-fleet played a vital role in reaching fires at remote areas that wouldn't normally be accessible by road. "In Tasmania, there's a lot of the vegetation and there are some areas out there which, particularly the World Heritage Site places, are otherwise

inaccessible, so these (aircraft) are just perfect. You can get aircraft out there and put some water on these fires that we otherwise wouldn't be able to," he said. "The whole idea is keeping fires small. We can get out there quickly and keep that fire down early, particularly on the really high fire danger days ... they can get away very, very quickly."



Special Intelligence pilot Kym Fullerton at left, TFS chief officer Dermot Barry help to deliver critical intelligence to teams on the ground. Pictures: Chris Kidd

# EYES IN SKY

Tasmania Fire Service chief officer Dermot Barry said aerial firefighting has already proven beneficial this summer. "This supports our strategy, which is really around what we call the rapid weight of attack – the attention now, during the summer season especially, is whenever we see smoke, whenever we get a call of a fire out in vegetation, not

only do we double the amount of ground crews that we send, we also use these aircraft and get them into the air immediately," Mr Barry said. "Often they will arrive before our ground crews have. Not only will they be able to give us on-the-ground intelligence – as in what they see, where it's burning and what direction – but they're also able to contain the fire."

“It's very light, we can get out pretty quickly.”  
KYM FULLERTON